

Johnstone an unlikely favorite

Surprising Indy Car driver has had success at Mid-Ohio

By T.E. McHale
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COLUMBUS — The 1995 Indy Car season has already produced its share of surprises, with eight different winners through 13 events.

Though he isn't among that number, Parker Johnstone may be the biggest surprise of all.

A comparative neophyte on the Indy Car circuit, Johnstone set the series on its ear just two weeks ago, when he came out of nowhere to take the pole for the July 30 Marlboro 500 at Brooklyn, Mich. His average speed of 230.458 miles per hour was all the more astounding because it came in Johnstone's first competitive appearance on an oval track.

It also marked the first Indy Car pole for a Honda-powered car, as well as the first in over two decades for Firestone tires. Johnstone didn't fare as well in the race, completing only 100 of 250 laps before a wheel bearing failure sent him to the sidelines.

Still, he refers to his Michigan experience as "historic."

"All things considered, it was a good way to start an oval track career," said Johnstone, a three-time International Motor Sports Association (IMSA) Camel Lights series champion. "But I'm not sure the guys on the team realize what we accomplished yet."

"They've been so focused on the task at hand, that it will probably



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be December or January before it hits them."

The "task at hand" is this weekend's Miller Genuine Draft 200 at the Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course. Johnstone and the Motorola Cellular team enter Sunday's 3 p.m. event hoping to build on the momentum of Michigan and improve on their season-high 11th-place finish at Cleveland July 23.

Mid-Ohio's 2.25-mile, 15-turn layout is friendly ground for Johnstone, who has set numerous track records while winning numerous Sports Car Club of America and IMSA races here over the years.

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"The only thing I haven't been successful in is an Indy Car," Johnstone said. "Guys like myself and Scott Pruett have run every conceivable class of car (at Mid-Ohio) over the years, in everything from monsoon conditions to 100-degree heat.

"You hear a lot about Bobby Rahal and his so-called home track advantage. I've learned a lot from watching Bobby over the years. He drives in some pretty unique places on the race track, and I've tried to take advantage of what I've seen."

This season, especially, Rahal has added to his reputation for saving equipment and finishing races. Rahal is in second place in the drivers standings, behind Canadian Jacques Villeneuve, despite

not having won a race all season.

But Rahal has become a rare percentage player, in a field which is becoming more and more aggressive, according to Johnstone.

"Nobody in this field is conservative, not even Bobby," Johnstone said. "With cars being separated often times by only hundredths of a second, these guys are going into a whole other realm of aggressiveness.

"I don't think that's a bad thing. I think it's going to be good for the sport, and for the spectators, it's going to be great."

Hoping to build on his success in Michigan, Johnstone said this weekend's goal is to last for all 83 laps of Sunday's feature.

"What we really need to do is finish a race and finish well," he said. "I think that (Honda drivers) Scott Goodyear and Andre Ribeiro

will be our toughest competitors, because they'll be in similar equipment.

"If we could qualify (close to) the other two Honda cars, that would be a big boost for us. Our expectations are high, but we have to be realistic.

"Although if we don't do well at Mid-Ohio, I think you'll see a lot of short ropes off of tall trees," Johnstone added with a laugh.

Sunday's 3 p.m. Indy Car race will be televised live by ABC-TV (Channels 5 and 6 on the Adelphia Cable system). Practice begins Friday, with qualifying scheduled for 2:30 p.m. Friday and 11:45 a.m. Saturday.

The weekend's support events include the Players Ltd/Toyota Atlantic Championship, the Sachs Clutches Challenge of the Barber Dodge Pro Series, the Bridgestone

Supercar Championship and the U.S. Formula Ford 2000 National Championship.

The Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course is located three miles west of Lexington, with entrances off Steam Corners Rd. and St. Rt. 97. For race and ticket information, call 884-4000.

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